

April 21, 2003

The Honorable Phil Crane
Chairman
Subcommittee on Trade
House Ways and Means Committee
1104 Longworth HOB

Dear Chairman Crane,

As you consider bringing forward legislation granting the Lao People's Democratic Republic normalized trade relations, I strongly encourage you to review the current and historic activities of the Lao government to repress their people, and ensure that such legislation serves to end these practices.

As a representative of a large Lao-Hmong community in western Wisconsin, I have followed the human rights situation in Laos closely, and have introduced and supported legislation to condemn the Lao government on its repressive practices. Allegations of the killing of ethnic minorities, including Hmong, by government security forces are serious and alarming. Particularly distressing is the lack of assistance from the Lao government in the investigation in to the 1999 disappearance of two U.S. citizens, Michael Vang and Houa Ly, traveling near Laos. It is important that Congress understands the seriousness of these reports and seeks cooperation from the Lao government before granting normal trade relations.

In its 2002 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Laos, the State Department makes clear the lack of respect for human rights demonstrated by the Lao government. For example:

- “The Government's human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit serious abuses. Citizens do not have the right to change their government. Members of the security forces abused detainees, especially those suspected of insurgent or antigovernment activity. Prisoners were abused and tortured, and prison conditions generally are extremely harsh and life threatening. Police used arbitrary arrest, detention, and surveillance.”
- “The [LPDR] armed forces are responsible for external security but also have some domestic security responsibilities that include counterterrorism and

counterinsurgency activities and control of an extensive system of village militias....
Some members of the security forces committed serious human rights abuses.”

- “The [Lao] Government continued to restrict freedom of religion...”
- “The [Lao] Government severely restricted political speech and writing in practice. The Government also prohibited most criticism that it deems harmful to its reputation.”

It must be demonstrated that through normal trade relations between the United States and Laos, the many people of Laos will benefit, not just an elite few that encourages the current regime’s practices. As a believer that free trade does serve to benefit people and encourage the distribution of wealth and ideas, I do remain concerned with granting NTR to Laos due to the Lao government’s continued oppression of the Lao people and its strict control over means of communication.

Holding the Lao government accountable for human rights standards must be a major issue in considering granting NTR for Laos. I will continue to work with you and other members of Congress to make sure these important issues are addressed.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ron Kind
Member of Congress